Diving into open water

San Francisco's Aquatic Park Cove is situated between Fort Mason and Fisherman's Wharf, enclosed by Municipal Pier on one side and Hyde Street Pier on the other. Open-water swimmers frequent the cove year-round, braving variable weather conditions and water temperatures that typically fall between 50 and 65 degrees Fahrenheit — the lower end of which is more than 30 degrees colder than the average swimming pool.

Bonnie Tsui is a swimmer, surfer and the author of "Why We Swim," a nonfiction book which investigates human relationships to swimming and water. In an interview with The Urban Legend, she said, "The first few times that I swam in the bay … it was shockingly cold. … It really is such a shock to the system to actually choose to [swim in] it on purpose."

"Open-water swimming is 80% mental and 20% physical," Berkeley High School senior and marathon swimmer Maya Merhige said in an interview with The Urban Legend. "I really like pushing myself and just seeing how far I can go and how much I can do."

Merhige began marathon swimming — swimming distances of 10 kilometers or more — at the age of 12. At 14, she was the youngest woman to ever swim the Catalina Channel, and she became the youngest person to cross the Ka'iwi Channel in Hawaii at the age of 15. This was also her longest swim to date, for which she spent more than 27 and a half hours in the water.

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San Francisco's open-water swimming scene provides the opportunity for anyone to test their limits in the cold. Aquatic Park is open to the public, but many swimmers who frequent the area are members of one of the two athletic clubs that sit at the water's edge: South End Rowing Club (SERC) and the Dolphin Club. Both clubs were founded in San Francisco during the latter half of the nineteenth century and were initially dedicated to rowing.

"When commercial ships came from China and Europe into San Francisco harbors, … people rowed as fast as they could to these ships to make deals and see what products they were selling," said Jari Salomaa, an accomplished open-water swimmer and member of the Dolphin Club's Board of Governors, in an interview with The Urban Legend. "Those who were the fastest rowers made the best deals, so the rowers were kind of celebrated athletes at the time."

In the mid-to-late 1800s, social reforms connecting fitness, productivity and manliness helped the sport gain attention. Rowing was widely considered more compatible with societal norms than sports such as boxing, which was also popular at the time. "'Moral sports' inculcated such values as orderliness, respect for rules, self-denial, courage, and 'Christian manliness,'" wrote SERC members Bob Barde and Pat Cuneen in their book "South End: Sport and Community at the Dock of the Bay."

Newspapers in cities such as New York, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia and San Francisco quickly picked up on the American public's growing fascination with rowing. In 1873, the San Francisco Chronicle wrote, "[Rowing] promotes strength, encourages sociability, prevents dissipation and tends to make a man rely upon his own powers."

Six Irish immigrants started SERC in 1873 under the name South End Boat Club. "[SERC] was established as a rowing club, but in order to maintain the ability to pay its rent, it needed to have more than one sport," SERC member Andrew Burrel said in an interview with The Urban Legend. "So they introduced swimming as well, and since then it's been a strong dual-sport club."

The Dolphin Club came into existence four years later. "In 1877, 25 German immigrants started the Dolphin Club. [These were] guys who mostly wanted a place for their kids to be able to swim and [a place] for them to be able to just be in the water," said Diane Walton, the Dolphin Club's current president, in an interview with The Urban Legend.

The two clubs have a century-and-a-half-long history of sport in the San Francisco Bay, but neither originated at their current addresses.

Before settling into its current home at 502 Jefferson Street, the Dolphin Club was located in a few different places around Aquatic Park. "Originally, there were three clubs all designated to this Aquatic Park area, out of which Dolphin Club and South End Rowing Club remain," Salomaa said. "The third club burned down, and then the Dolphin Club kind of expanded into their area. … [Then] they lifted the whole building and transferred it [to where it is now]."

Exploring SERC's past is trickier. According to Barde and Cuneen, much of SERC's early history consists of club members' educated guesses. However, club records — as well as the club's name — suggest that SERC was originally housed somewhere at the south end of the city before moving to its current location at 500 Jefferson St. following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

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While the two clubs now admit members regardless of gender identity, this was not always the case. "It wasn't until sometime in the 1970s that [SERC] started admitting women members," SERC member Liz Hamel said in an interview with The Urban Legend. "Initially, it was just a men's club."

The restrictions around women's admission to South End were recorded in writing. Article III, Section 2 of the Dec. 10, 1973 South End Rowing Club Bylaws states, "The membership of this Club shall consist of respectable males over the age of eighteen (18) years, free of indebtedness to any other rowing or athletic club."

The Dolphin Club shared the prohibition against women. "A lot of clubs, like the Olympic Club, were exclusively for the elite, or richer people. The Dolphin Club had … all kinds of immigrants, but [they were] all men initially," Salomaa said.

SERC and the Dolphin Club were among multiple other San Francisco athletic clubs that denied women formal membership. However, women could occasionally access SERC and the Dolphin Club if they were friends with or married to male members.

In the mid-1970s, female athletes sought an end to the two clubs' discrimination through three lawsuits. A group of female swimmers — who would later be known as SERC's Founding Women — filed the first of these lawsuits, Arian v. San Francisco Rowing Club, in 1974. The group sought to turn one of the city's other male-only athletic clubs, San Francisco Rowing Club (SFRC), into a club exclusively for women.

In 1976, the original lawsuit became Rodman v. Dolphin Boating and Swimming Club et al., which argued that private swimming and boating clubs could not deny public access to land that was part of a public park. The lawsuit was then renamed to Bessig v. The Dolphin Boating and Swimming Club after Marilyn Rodman dropped out.

SERC announced the decision to amend the club by-laws in order to permit women to become members later that year. In December, South End Rowing Club admitted its first two female members, with the Dolphin Club following shortly after.

"[The Dolphin Club] let women in in 1977," said Diane Campbell, a Dolphin Club member and open-water swim clinic instructor, in an interview with The Urban Legend. "It took them 100 years to let women in, which is absurd."

In the beginning, Campbell and other female swimmers faced barriers to entry to the Dolphin Club that their male counterparts did not. "I can swim just as well as anybody else, so there's no reason I shouldn't be here," Campbell said. "But when I joined [in 1979], I had to have a sponsor, [and] I had to [go through] a big application process."

When she first started open-water swimming in the bay regularly, Campbell was one of few female members of either the Dolphin Club or SERC. "I don't know the [exact] ratio now, of men to women. I think we might be semi-equal. But the whole world has changed along with these clubs," Campbell said. "I'm seeing way more really good women athletes because they've had the opportunities now to train and come up through the ranks."

While joining the Dolphin Club was not made easy for Campbell, after 45 years of membership, she is now considered a life member. Dolphin Club members of 25 years or longer are granted life membership. Life members enjoy a waived membership fee and are given free access to all of the club's facilities. They also tend to garner a great deal of respect from the rest of the club's membership.

"[If you are a life member], they put your picture up on the wall. … They are celebrating the people that have been in the club for many years," Salomaa said. "The life members have special events. They do dinners, and the younger younger members kind of take care of them by waiting on them."

Many of the Dolphin Club's life members are on the older side — according to Salomaa, many refer to themselves as the Old Goats — but they are not limited by their age. In 2023, a group of six life members ages 70 to 75 made history as the oldest American relay team to swim the English Channel.

"There's a lot of careers that, if you reach a certain age, they don't want you to do anymore, or they think you're too old," said Campbell, age 76. "This is the one place that reveres [the] wisdom of age. We have 90 year-olds and we have 20 year-olds, and everybody has respect. … And it's not because it's politically correct. It's actually because older people are interesting. … I just think that's the coolest thing in the world."

Regardless of differences in age, the bay's open-water swimmers have created

"It's really stunning to be out there and enjoy this part of the city that not many people know exists." - Mackenzie Kirk

"There's just this very eye-of-the-hurricane kind of thing about being out there."
- Diane Walton

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a tight-knit community. "I liken it to lemmings jumping off of a cliff. If one goes, we all go," Burrel said.

The clubs have helped make the Bay Area one of a few places across the globe where open-water swimming is particularly significant. "There [are] a couple of hubs for open-water swimming in the world," Merhige said. "It's gonna be in Australia, the Bay Area and in Ireland — in Dublin. Those three are pretty much the three biggest places."

Within the Bay Area, Alcatraz Island is one of the most well-known open-water swimming landmarks. The U.S. government acquired the island in 1849, and since then it has housed California's first lighthouse and been used as a military fort and a maximum security prison. The island became part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in 1972 and now primarily serves as a tourist attraction and historical site.

Often referred to as an escape from Alcatraz because of the island's history as a federal prison, the one-and-a-quarter-mile journey from Alcatraz Island to Aquatic Park is perhaps the most well-known swim in the Bay Area. In 2020, the World Open Water Swimming Association named the swim fourth out of the world's top 100 island swims.

SERC and the Dolphin Club facilitate a number of Alcatraz swims each year, the majority of which are only open to club members. These include casual weekly swims as well as events such as the annual SERC-hosted New Year's Day Alcatraz Swim. "Some people who are members of the clubs, they're like, 'Oh, swimming from Alcatraz is nothing.' It's something they do on a Tuesday morning, you know?" Hamel said.

SERC hosts their newly renamed Alcatraz Open Swim annually, usually at the end of August or beginning of September when the water is on the warmer side. Each year, Bay Area locals and swimmers from across the world make their way to San Francisco to participate in the swim.

"[The Alcatraz Invitational] is actually the only swim that [SERC] puts on that's open to the public, and it's actually a fundraiser for the club. But I think it's also really a way to be ambassadors for this experience of swimming Alcatraz for people who don't normally get to do it," said Hamel, who served as volunteer manager for the 2024 Alcatraz Invitational. "We know that people come from all around the world, and [for them] it's a dream to do that swim."

"The whole world has changed along with these clubs." - Diane Campbell

Many open-water swimmers share an appreciation for the experience of being outdoors and in the cold, even when the weather is less-than-ideal. "I like swimming in [the wind and rain] because it's like swimming in a washing machine," Dolphin Club member Jeff White, age 65, said in an interview with The Urban Legend.

"It's so different, the expansiveness of the ocean and the freedom that I feel, and also just the ability that I have to kind of force myself and open up. It feels like I can kind of do whatever I want, and I really like that feeling," Merhige said.

Others also spoke to the sense of freedom found in open-water swimming. "It's really quite magical and also quite transformative for a lot of people," Tsui said. "I thrill in it, swimming in the bay. It is one of those shrieking, laughing things that you do, and it takes you [through] an out-of-body experience."

"I just know that between the time I get in the water and get out, there's a transformation," said Campbell. "I try to analyze it, but all I know is I could be as crabby or worried as can be, and when I get out, it's all gone. … When I get out there, I can't think of my problems or worries because I'm too busy surviving the biting cold and enjoying the scenery."

Some cite open-water swimming as a restorative experience. "When you go in the water, … everything else goes away. … There's just this very eye-of-the-hurricane kind of thing about being out there," Walton said. "You're just in it, [and] there's something whole about it."

Many swimmers are drawn to open-water's unpredictability, which sits right at our fingertips in the San Francisco Bay. "[Open-water swimming] is pretty wild. It's completely different than pool swimming," Dolphin Club member Mackenzie Kirk, age 28, said in an interview with The Urban Legend. "The distances, the times, the temperature — it's always changing. And it's really stunning to be out there and enjoy this part of the city that not many people know exists." ■